

Gates: Spending cuts don't have to harm learning

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Bill Gates addresses the National Governors Association Winter Meeting in Washington, Monday, Feb. 28, 2011. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

(AP) -- Even in the midst of large spending cuts, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates said Monday that schools can improve the performance of students if they put more emphasis on rewarding excellent teaching and less emphasis on paying teachers based on seniority and graduate degrees.

Gates spoke to the nation's governors mindful of the severe financial woes that many of them face as they try to bridge deficits totaling about \$125 billion in the coming fiscal year. He said there are some clear do's and don'ts. Among the do's: Lift caps on class sizes and get more students in front of the very best [teachers](#). Those teachers would get paid more with the savings generated from having fewer personnel overall.

"There are people in the field who think class size is the only thing," Gates said in an interview with The Associated Press prior to his speech. "But in fact, the dominant factor is having a great teacher in front of the classroom."

Among his recommendations on what not to do, Gates told governors that they should not use furloughs to reduce costs because it's only a temporary fix that leaves compensation demands intact for future years. Nor should they put more dollars into compensating teachers based on the advanced degrees they've obtained and their years of service as a teacher. He said the ideal scenario would be to classify teachers and to compensate them based on how well their students learned.

Gates is recognized as one of the wealthiest people in the world with assets valued at \$54 billion. He still serves as the chairman of Microsoft's board of directors, but much of his time and considerable resources are devoted to improving the health of people in developing countries and to improving [student performance](#) in the United States. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is working with school districts in six states on changing how teachers are evaluated. The evaluations include student surveys as well as video cameras that reinforce for teachers the most modern communication techniques.

Gates said the systems currently used to evaluate teachers too often rate the vast majority at the top. The problem with that system is that "the great teachers stayed great, but the average teachers remained average," he said.

In speaking to the governors, Gates noted that the number of teachers and support personnel has increased from about 40 adults per 1,000 students in 1960 to about 125 adults per 1,000 students today. His point was that states have made costly changes that have not led to higher student achievement. High school scores in math and reading have been

flat since the 1970s.

Gov. Lincoln Chafee of Rhode Island pointed out that some of the increase in personnel has been required by the courts as states have taken on a much greater role in educating students with special needs. He recalled visiting a classroom of eight children with disabilities and noted that there were three teachers for those students.

"So there's our costs," Chafee said.

Gates said that educating special needs students is an important factor in increasing costs, but he also said it accounted for only about 15 percent of the increase.

North Carolina Gov. Bev Perdue said while expanding class sizes sounds easy, she wondered what the effect on students would be if a bad teacher were asked to take on five or six more children.

"There's nothing worse than having a bad teacher, and that's why our key priority is the evaluation system," said Gates, who stressed that teachers must have a major role in creating that evaluation system.

Gates was asked in an interview to weigh in on events taking place in Wisconsin, where workers belonging to unions, many of them teachers, are protesting efforts that would hurt their ability to negotiate labor contracts. In particular, would it be easier to improve schools if unions had less say in how resources are spent?

"We're not involved in those issues at all. No system is going to work unless teachers like it," Gates said.

He also noted that unions have partnered with his foundation in the school districts where they are trying to change how teachers are

evaluated.

Gates said the United States is still a worldwide leader in many aspects of its educational system, noting that its top universities are viewed as the best in the world. But there are too many areas where the system fails.

"The place where you really see the inequity is the inner city," he said.

Gates also said he's still confident about the economic future of the United States, even as other countries have gained or moved ahead on key measures of learning. He said the country will benefit from the innovation that takes place in those countries, even as they buy airplanes, software and pharmaceutical drugs from the United States.

"It's a win-win type thing" Gates told the Associated Press.

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